

for more immediate testing, which allows to bypass what may be as many as two hundred samples queued in the system (page 10, lines 14-17). The specification also teaches that the system of the present invention includes a STAT button 38 that, when manually pressed, alerts the system that there are sample tubes in STAT positions that must be accessed (page 11, lines 17-24). Therefore, the specification sufficiently describes the alert mechanism of claims 11 and 24.

Claims 20-32 are rejected under 35 U.S.C. 112, second paragraph, as being indefinite for failing to particularly point out and distinctly claim the subject matter which applicant regards as the invention. In particular, claim 20 is rejected due to the use of the word "it" and because the term "the sample identification station" lacks proper antecedent basis. In response, applicants have amended claim 20 to address the Examiner's objections. In light of these amendments, applicants respectfully request the withdrawal of the claim rejections under 35 U.S.C. 112, second paragraph.

Claims 1-11 and 13-34 are rejected under 35 U.S.C. 103(a) as being unpatentable over Mazza *et al.* (U.S. Patent No. 5,350,564) in view of Kodama *et al.* (U.S. Patent No. 6,117,683). This rejection is respectfully traversed.

Both independent claims 1 and 20 require a carriage mechanism that grips and transports a primary sample tube. More particularly, the carriage mechanism of claim 1 grips one of a plurality of primary sample tubes stored in a storing station, transports the sample tube to the sampling station, and then returns the primary sample tube to the storing station. Claim 20 requires a carriage mechanism that grips the primary sample tube contained in a holder, whereby the primary sample tube separates from the holder, and transports the primary sample tube to the sample identification station.

The Mazza reference does not teach or suggest a carriage mechanism that returns a sample tube to the storing station. Neither does the Mazza reference teach or suggest a carriage mechanism that grips a sample tube, whereby the sample tube separates from its holder. Instead, the Mazza reference describes an automatic chemical analyzer that utilizes interlocking carrier members for storing

and transporting individual sample tubes in one direction, from an on-loading area to an off-loading area. The samples are manually loaded into carriers positioned within an on-loading area. Then the carriers are pushed from the on-loading area into a loading chute, and then into receptacles of a conveyor. Once the carriers are pushed into the loading chute, they cannot be returned back to the on-loading area. Also, the analyzer of Mazza cannot handle tubes separately from their carriers. Once a sample tube is placed into a carrier, the tube stays in the carrier throughout the testing. When testing of the sample is completed, the carrier is removed from the conveyor onto an off-loading station. At that time, a sample tube may be manually removed from the carrier.

In this regard, applicants respectfully draw the Examiner's attention to Figures 1 and 3A of the Mazza reference for a more detailed discussion of the operation of Mazza's analyzer. Initially, plural interlocked ranks 18 of sample tube carriers are arranged on an on-loading area 12 so that individual sample tube carriers in the ranks align to form forwardly-extending files 20 (column 7, lines 32-39). The on-loading area 12 includes a number of pushing mechanisms that slide sample tube carriers along predetermined passages. The pushing mechanisms are used "for slidably advancing the sample tube carriers 16; for laterally sliding the carriers out of their que 14 of the stat line, or out of files 20, and into alignment with a loading chute 22; for slidably advancing the carriers individually along the loading chute 22" onto turntable 226 for sample identification by bar code reader 234; "and for slidably advancing the individual sample tube carriers 16 further along the loading chute 22 and into an individual aligned receptacle 32 of ... endless loop conveyor 34" (column 7, lines 40-62, and column 15, lines 60-68). Thus, the carriers of Mazza are not gripped and lifted to be placed in a desired location, but rather slid along a predetermined pass.

The endless loop conveyor 34 transports the samples to at least one chemical analysis module. Carriers with tested samples are discharged from the endless loop conveyor device into an off-loading tray 56 which again interlocks the carriers and presents them in rank and file groups for subsequent handling (abstract, column 5,

lines 45-55). Sample tubes remain in the carriers from the beginning of the testing, when the sample tubes are placed into the carriers, to the end of the testing, when the carriers are discharged into an off-loading tray. Therefore, in the Mazza reference, at no time do the sample tubes separate from their holders. Accordingly, the Mazza reference does not teach or suggest a carriage mechanism that grips a sample tube, whereby the sample tube separates from its holder, and transports the tube to the sample identification station, as required by the instant claim 20.

Also, the analyzer of Mazza accommodates only the forward advancement of the carriers. For example, once the carrier is pushed onto the turntable 226 and the sample bar code is read by the bar code reader 234, the pusher pad 224 engages the carrier and moves it along and out of the loading chute into the loading receptacle 32 of the conveyor 34 (column 15, line 60, - column 16, line 32). Accordingly, the carrier with the sample tube cannot return back to the on-loading area 12. Therefore, the Mazza reference does not teach or suggest a carriage mechanism that grips a sample tube, transports the tube to a sample identification station, and then returns it to the storing station, as required by the instant claim 1.

Finally, the analyzer of Mazza is constructed to maintain rank and file of each sample during transport of the samples (column 4, lines 7-31). Additionally, as explained above, the analyzer of Mazza allows only forward advancing of the samples by sliding their carriers through the loading chute. As a result of such an arrangement, the analyzer of Mazza does not allow an automatic and random access to sample tubes positioned in the on-loading sample area. The present invention unexpectedly overcomes this disadvantage by providing a more flexible carriage mechanism, which grips and picks up sample tubes from the storing station in any desired order. Thus, contrary to the Examiner's belief, the Mazza reference does not teach or suggest the carriage mechanism of either instant claim 1 or 20.

The Kodama reference cannot remedy the defect of the Mazza reference, and is not relied upon by the Examiner for such. The Kodama reference has no teaching whatsoever of moving an individual primary sample tube, much less of the carriage

mechanism that grips and transports a primary sample tube to the sampling station and then returns the primary sample tube to the storing station, as required by the instant claim 1. Neither does the Kodama reference teach or suggest a carriage mechanism that grips a sample tube, whereby the sample tube separates from its holder, and transports the tube to the sample identification station, as required by the instant claim 20.

Instead, the Kodama reference teaches a transfer mechanism for transferring sample racks 9 with sample vessels 76 from rack trays 11 and 12 to rack trays 20 and 21. As shown in Figure 2 of the Kodama reference, the racks are advanced in a forward direction by a system including a hook device 8 and conveyance path 6, main conveyance line 13, and conveyance path 7 with pushing devices 23 and 24 (columns 4-5). A plurality of analysis units 100 and 200 are arranged along the main conveyance line 13. The racks may be transferred by transfer mechanisms 15a, 15b, 19a, and 19b to and from sample transfer areas 71 and 72 of the analysis units (column 6, lines 5-31). In the sample transfer areas, the contents of the samples are delivered from the sample tubes to reaction vessels by a sample delivery device 204 (column 8, lines 45-65). After the samples are delivered from the sample tubes, the racks holding the sample tubes are transferred back to the main conveyance line 13 and ultimately the racks are transported to the off-loading trays 20 and 21. Nowhere in the Kodama analyzer do the sample tubes separate from their holding racks. Therefore, nothing in the Kodama reference teaches or suggests a carriage mechanism that grips a sample tube, whereby the sample tube separates from its holder, and transports the tube to the sample identification station, as required by the instant claim 20.

Also, the Kodama reference teaches moving sample tubes in the racks in one direction only. Accordingly, once a rack holding the sample tubes is pushed onto the conveyance line 13 and then sample transfer area 71 or 72, the rack will continue forward until it reaches off-loading trays 20 and 21 and cannot automatically return to the on-loading trays 11 and 12. Thus, nothing in the Kodama reference teaches or suggests a carriage mechanism that grips a sample tube, transports the tube to a

sample identification station, and then returns it to the storing station, as required by the instant claim 1.

Furthermore, it would not have been obvious to combine the two references, because such a combination is not possible without significant modifications to the Mazza system.

Mazza describes an automatic chemical analyzer that utilizes interlocking carrier members for storing and transporting individual sample tubes (abstract and column 7, lines 19-39). The carrier members must be unlocked and loaded one-by-one onto a rotator assembly for bar code reading (column 7, lines 40-62). In the Kodama reference, on the other hand, conventional, non-modular sample racks are used to transport sample tubes within the automatic analyzer. In order to combine Mazza and Kodama as suggested by the Examiner, one would have to completely redesign Mazza's analyzer, which uses modular locking/unlocking individual sample tube carriers, to accommodate the tube racks of Kodama. Such a modification is not possible without destroying the function of the analyzer disclosed in Mazza. It is respectfully submitted, therefore, that it would be unobvious to combine Mazza and Kodama to arrive at the present invention.

Additionally, there is no suggestion in the cited references of modifying the analyzers disclosed therein in the direction of the present invention, nor is there any suggestion whatsoever of the desirability of such a modification. The mere fact that a reference may be modified in the direction of the claimed invention does not make the modification obvious unless the reference expressly or impliedly teaches or suggests the desirability of the modification. Thus, it is respectfully submitted that the ordinarily skilled artisan, working without the benefit of the applicant's specification, would have had no motivation to combine the features of the cited references to arrive at the present claims 1 and 20. Therefore, claims 1 and 20 are neither anticipated nor rendered obvious by the Mazza and Kodama references, either alone or in combination. Claims 2-19 and 21-34 depend, directly or indirectly, from patentable claims 1 and 20 and are, therefore, believed to be patentable for at least the same reasons as claims 1 and 20.

Claim 12 is rejected under 35 U.S.C. 103(a) as being unpatentable over Mazza *et al.* (U.S. Patent No. 5,350,564) and Kodama *et al.* (U.S. Patent No. 6,117,683) as applied to claim 10, and further in view of Kurosaki *et al.* (U.S. Patent No. 5,587,129). This rejection is respectfully traversed.

The Kurosaki reference, cited against claim 12, does not address the deficiencies of the Mazza and Kodama references. Kurosaki is relied on for teaching a cap piercer, and it does not teach a "carriage mechanism that grips one of the plurality of primary sample tubes," as required by claim 1. Therefore, claim 1, as well as claim 12 that depends therefrom, is patentable over the Mazza, Kodama, and Kurosaki references, either alone or in any combination.

In view of the foregoing, it is respectfully submitted that the application is in condition for allowance. Reexamination and reconsideration of the application, as amended, are requested.

If for any reason the Examiner finds the application other than in condition for allowance, the Examiner is requested to call the undersigned attorney at the Los Angeles, California telephone number (213) 337-6700 to discuss the steps necessary for placing the application in condition for allowance.

If there are any fees due in connection with the filing of this response, please charge the fees to our Deposit Account No. 50-1314.

Respectfully submitted,
HOGAN & HARTSON, P.C.

DRAFT

Date: October __, 2001

By: _____
Wei-Ning Yang
Registration No. 38,690
Attorney for Applicant(s)

500 South Grand Avenue, Suite 1900
Los Angeles, California 90071
Phone: 213-337-6700
Fax: 213-337-6701

Version with markings to show changes made:

Please replace the text of claim 20 with the following text:

20. (Amended) A clinical chemistry system comprising:

a sample identification station comprising a sample identification mechanism for determining sample identification information from a primary sample tube;

a transferring mechanism for transferring a volume of the sample from the primary sample tube into a secondary sample tube;

a carriage mechanism that grips the primary sample tube contained in a holder, whereby the primary sample tube separates from the holder, and transports [it] the primary sample tube to the sample identification station;

a continuous transport mechanism for moving secondary sample tubes within the system;

first and second sample tube transfer stations, respectively, for coupling to first and second analyzers, the first and second sample tube transfer stations adapted to move the secondary sample tube from the continuous transport mechanism to an interface of a first or second analyzer; and

a host computer, the host computer receiving sample identification information and issuing a sample testing message that includes one of the first and second analyzers as a destination.